

Memory and Multimodal Subjectivity in *You Don't Know What War Is*

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Abstract

The conflict in Ukraine has been a complex and deeply troubling chapter in contemporary geopolitics. Originating in 2014, the tensions escalated on 24 February 2022 when Russia annexed Crimea, leading to a protracted and multifaceted conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The war, being the biggest attack on a European country since World War II, has resulted in significant human suffering, displacement, and trauma. The memory of such war has been vividly featured in *You Don't Know What War Is: The Diary of a Young Girl from Ukraine* (2022) by Yeva Skalietska. A twelve-year-old girl, Skalietska documents her live experiences that have shattered her life and family. The book employs multimodal features, i.e., text and images to represent her traumatic memory and her subjectivity. The paper will utilize principles of trauma theory to analyse her traumatic experiences. It will also use (1) perceptual, (2) structural and (3) ideological analytical tools proposed by Serafini (2010) to decode the multimodal subjectivity embedded in the text, and thus adding value to scholarship on trauma and war narratives.

Keywords

War, Trauma, Memory, Subjectivity, Multimodality

INTRODUCTION

Geo-political conflicts between nations are not new. Different countries confront such conflicts quite sometimes. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been a complex and deeply troubling chapter in the contemporary geopolitics. Began in 2014, the conflict got escalated on 24 February 2022 when Russia annexed Crimea, leading to a protracted and multifaceted conflict in Eastern Ukraine. This conflict has caused thousands of civilian and military casualties. Shockingly, 8 million Ukrainians have been internally displaced and more than 8.2 million have fled the country by April 2023. This thus results in creating Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II. At the core of such event lies extensive human suffering, displacement, and trauma. *You Don't Know What War Is: The Diary of a Young Girl from Ukraine* (2022) by Yeva Skalietska poignantly voices the prognosis of Ukrainians in general and Yeva's in particular.

TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES AND MEMORY

Trauma studies, Luckhurst (2018) observes, emerged as part of a wider realignment of cultural and literary theory in the early 1990s. The works of Cathy Caruth gave a big boost to flourishing cultural trauma theory. The studies on trauma emphasize traumatic events, experiences of these; the function of memory and the tools for representation of trauma. Trauma and memory share a complex and intertwined relationship within the human psyche. When an individual experiences a traumatic event, the impact often extends beyond the immediate emotional and physical repercussions, influencing the way memories are encoded, stored, and retrieved. According to Ginsburg (2007), trauma is a psychological response caused due to the defilement of one's own mental representations of the world on the face of an extreme horrible event. This heightened emotional arousal can result in vivid and persistent memories, making traumatic events stand out prominently in one's recollections. "Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind" (Terr, 1990, p. 8). The experiences of trauma badly affect the mental state of the victim. Such experiences are the wounds "inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth, 1995, p. 3).

From a catastrophic war to an ordinary everyday incident can be a cause of trauma for individuals. "An event is traumatic if it is extremely upsetting and at least temporarily overwhelms the individual's internal resources" (Briere and Scott 4). It is understood as something "that was once known as 'suffering' is now called 'trauma' as the roots of tragic

incidents mainly and initially contain despair” (AteşciKoçak, 2015, p. 17). “The event is naturally is outside the scope of the possible for the traumatized victim whose worldly representations vary due to personal background such as cultural, ethnic, racial and social distinctions” (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 29).

TRAUMA AND SUBJECTIVITY

According to Caruth (1995), trauma “extends beyond the bounds of a marginal pathology and has become a central characteristic of the survivor experience of our time” (p. 417). This very statement of Caruth projects the subjectivity that the traumatic experiences embed. Trauma as a concept always connects to an event that is upsetting or overwhelming. Wallace (2020) highlights a notion of trauma held by Krysta Dancy, a licensed therapist, i.e., an experience that overwhelms our ability to cope. The American Psychological Association describes trauma as an emotional response to an awful event. These definitions of trauma reveal that one’s experiences of trauma can be quite subjective according to one’s ability to understand, respond and cope with different traumatic events. What causes trauma for someone cannot be the cause of trauma for others. Thus, trauma and the experiences of trauma are amply subjective.

TRAUMATIC MEMORY IN *YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT WAR IS*

The popular memoir of the contemporary time, *You Don’t Know What War Is (2022)* by Yeva Skalietska chronicles the harrowing and life shattering experiences of the Russian-Ukrainian war that caused in 2014 and got intensified on 24 February 2022 when Russia annexed Crimea. Yeva, as a witness, presents before us the firsthand experiences of the war minute by minute. She has gone through the traumatic situation, the explosions of bombs, the massive devastation, and a large-scale displacement. She highlights the uniqueness and veracity of her experiences in the “prologue.” It reads, “everyone knows the word 'war'. But very few understand what it truly means... When you find you have to face it, you feel totally lost, walled in by fright and despair... Until you've been there, you don't know what war is” (Skalietska, 2022, p.15).

A 12-year-old Ukrainian girl, Yeva recollects her experiences of war from her birthday, a few days before Russia invaded, to the moment when she and her grandmother have become two of the many refugees fleeing their home country for Dublin. The memoir begins with her account of her birthday where she says, “I wake up early on the morning of 14 February. Today is my birthday. I’m twelve—almost a teenager!” (Skalietska, 2022, p. 21). However, her excitement has not lasted long. Days later, Yeva writes: “All of a sudden, a massive rocket flew by and exploded with such force that I felt my heart go cold in my chest” (Skalietska, 2022, p. 33). She was in completely shock, and terrified. The outbreak of the war was a traumatic blow that she was not prepared for. The experiences of it were so traumatic, “mainly and initially contain[ing] despair” (AteşciKoçak, 2015, p. 17). The war and its psychological prognosis have been a part of her memory as “traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind” (Terr, 1990, p. 8). How the war has turned out to be her traumatic stressor can be easily understood from her words, “my hands were shaking, my teeth rattling. I felt squashed by fear. I realised I was having my first ever panic attack” (Skalietska, 2022, p. 34).

The unexpectedness and unpreparedness of the war contributed immensely to her trauma. “Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside” (Terr, 1990, p. 8). Here, the overwhelming experiences of the war and its sudden and unexpected onset gruesomely affected Eva’s life. She thus writes: “The war had begun. Explosions, noises, my heart beating loudly- I couldn’t think through the fear and noise. Tears were welling up in my eyes- I was afraid for my loved ones and for myself” (Skalietska, 2022, pp. 34-35). To overcome such fear, Yeva and her grandmother took shelter in a basement bunker, where she began writing this diary. She mentioned how she endured the bombings while sheltering underground. It was an awful experience for her. The memoir also features her desperate journey west to escape the conflict raging around them. After many endless train rides and a prolonged stay in an overcrowded refugee centre in Western Ukraine, Yeva and her beloved grandmother eventually find refuge in Ireland. There, she bravely begins to forge a new life, hoping she will be able to return home one day.

MULTIMODALITY AS A TOOL FOR REPRESENTING SUBJECTIVITY

Multimodality is the application of multiple modes within one medium. It can be defined as the use of more than one semiotic mode for the act of meaning- making or communication. It uses forms of verbal, nonverbal, and contextual communication. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines it as a discourse that has or involves several modes, modalities, or maxima. “Multimodality refers to the interplay between different representational modes, for instance, between images and written/spoken word” (Korhonen, 2010, p. 4).

Multimodality is generally used as a tool for textual analysis. Various modes of communication and expression such as text, images, sounds, gestures are examined to see how these together construct meanings and convey them. The texts, particularly dealing with traumatic experiences employ figurative languages and images to address the inherent problems in the representation of the mental turmoil. According to Caruth (1996), traumatic experiences are difficult to be represented for these “fragment consciousness and prevent direct linguistic representation” (4). The issue raised by Caruth can be, to a certain extent, addressed by employing multimodality as a narrative tool. *You Don’t Know What War Is (2022)* by Yeva is found to be utilizing multimodality to voice subjectivity of the writer. Yeva’s memoir uses both texts and images to convey the traumatic effects of the war on her mind and body. “The complexity of traumatic damage on the

brain,” as Ariew (2011) observes, “separates the traumatic event to the unconscious mind, thus the commonplace first-person narrative that conveys both the historical and emotional context of an experience becomes unusable” (1).

Yeva’s dairy entries embody text messages between her and her friends:

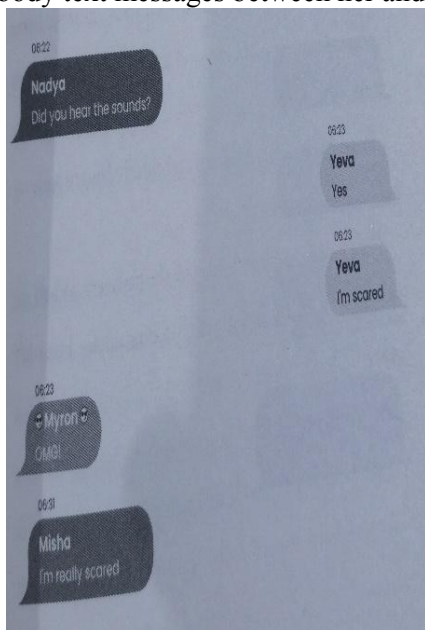


Fig. 1 p. 35

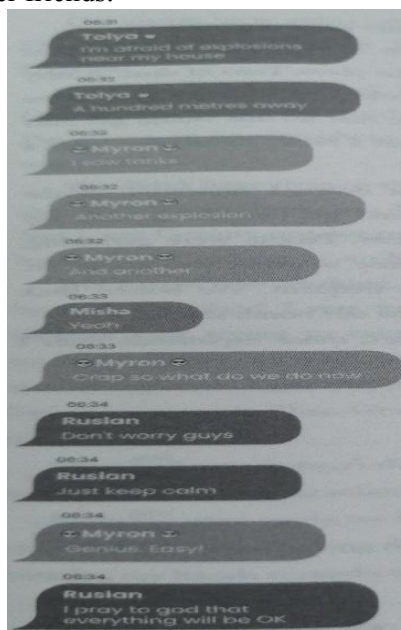


Fig. 2 p. 36

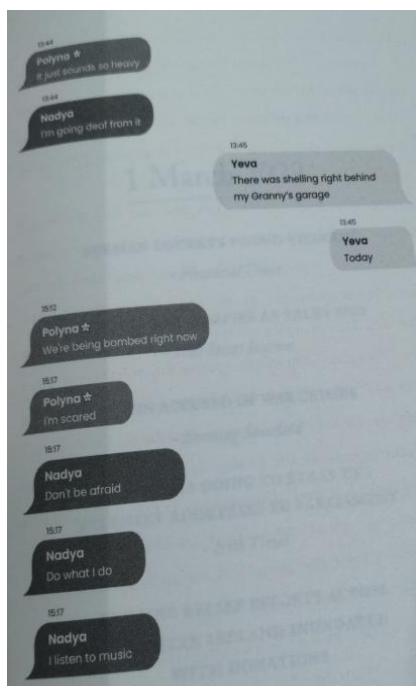


Fig. 3 p. 102

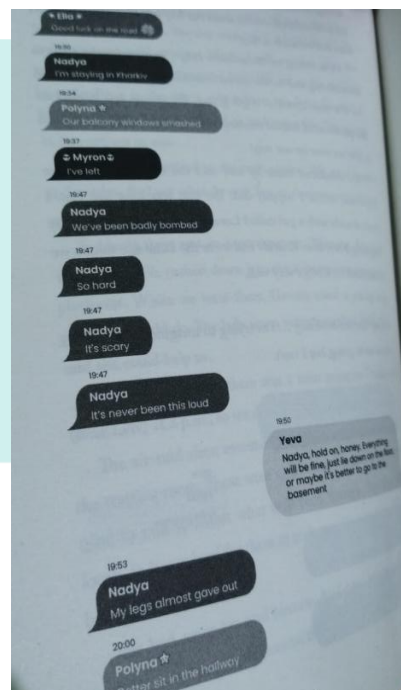


Fig. 4 p. 75

The above four images, containing the chats between Yeva and her friends, show how much they feared the sounds of explosions. There were repetitions of the expressions “another explosion” and “I’m scared.” Such repetitions reveal much about their panic attacks and their traumatic blows. The chats also give the reader more insight into how individual experiences of war can differ depending on viewpoint and location.

Yeva have embedded several photographs to say the unsayable experiences.

These photographs vividly record the destruction caused by explosions. Particularly, these document the losses that Yeva endured. Very painfully and shockingly she pointed out the remains of her house after being hit by missiles. The photographs also throw light on her subjectivity, i.e., her emotional connection to her house and locality the damage of which she grieved. These in an authentic way help the reader track Yeva and her granny’s journey from mere happiness to utter helplessness. It was so heart wrenching that the city they love, a city of parks, monasteries and beautiful old buildings are destroyed. Finally, when Yeva’s beloved apartment is hit by a missile, she and her grandmother decided to leave. Yeva and her grandmother made their way across Ukraine, through Budapest, and then to Dublin, where they were given refuge by a big-hearted couple, Gary and Catherine. Here, it can be argued that the photographs along with the verbal texts give a clear picture of Yeva’s hardship and suffering. Her traumatic account presented through these photographs could not otherwise be depicted so authentically. Multimodality, according to McQuarrie and Phillips

(2005), is important here, since the visual mode, for instance, may be purposefully used to transport messages that otherwise cannot be verbalized for legal or cultural reasons.



Photo 1 p. 191



Photo 2 p. 205



Photo 3 p. 206



Photo 4 p. 195



Photo 5 p. 83



Photo 6 p. 61

ANALYTICAL TOOLS TO FIGURE OUT MULTIMODAL SUBJECTIVITY

The analysis of the photographs presented can be done using (1) perceptual, (2) structural and (3) ideological analytical tools proposed by Serafini (2010) to decode the multimodal subjectivity embedded in the text. “The perceptual analytical perspective focuses on the literal or denotative contents of an image or series of images in a multimodal text, the elements of design, for example borders and font, and other visual and textual elements of these texts” (Serafini, 2010, p. 92). Perceptual analysis relies on prior knowledge and personal experiences of the reader or viewer. It believes in the fact that what we perceive is conditioned by what we know. Structural analysis considers compositional structures in making meaning. “Understanding the relationships among various visual structures or grammars and the meanings associated with them in a given culture is an important aspect of the structural analytical perspective” (Serafini, 2010, 95). Ideological analysis focuses on “the socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts of the production and dissemination of visual images and multimodal texts” (Serafini, 2010, p. 97). “To explore the meaning of images is to recognize that they are produced within dynamics of social power and ideology. Ideologies are systems of belief that exist within all cultures” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p. 21). All these analytical frameworks will draw upon a literal or denotative level of meaning based on perception of visual and textual elements.

From perceptual point of view, the photographs depict the fatal consequences of the war. The photographs embody broken windows, collapsed parts of the house, rocket lodging and so on. As a reader we can make out of these that the devastating effects of the war were so acute. This understanding is formed from the experiences of other wars that we have come across, such as WW1, WW2, Vietnam war, Holocaust and so on. Here the experiences of war of Yeva are merely subjective and the photographs encapsulate such subjectivity. The individual losses, problems caused to Yeva and her family and also to her friends have been given enough textual space. The photographs seem to speak much about their woes. Analyzed from another’s perspective these could denote other aspects of the war.

Following structural analysis, it can be deduced that these photographs entail the veracity of human sufferings, and specifically Yeva's. Particularly the foregrounding structure of the photographs highlight the devastations caused by the war, thus encoding Yeva's turmoil and internal break down. The portrait mode of the presentation of these photographs tend to imply the height of destruction and loss. The photographs are black in colour. We know black can be linked with darkness, evil, death and mourning. Hence, it can be assumed that Yeva, through these photographs, tries to exhibit the darkness that surrounds her life. Her grim uncertainty, and more importantly her suffering and trauma. This sort of analysis of these photographs is built upon the meanings associated with them in a given culture. Such analysis confirms to what Serafini (2010) opines, i.e., "narrative representations, framing, information zones, composition, colour and position are just a few of the structures that can be used to interpret visual images and multimodal texts" (95).

"Images are an important means through which ideologies are produced and onto which ideologies are projected" (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p. 21). When these photographs are read from such perspective, we must understand the socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts of the Russian- Ukrainian war get immensely manifested. The photographs exhibit the geo-political conflict between the two nations, continuing since 2014. Massive attacks and invasions have been the focal point of these. The dynamics of social power and ideology must have played pivotal role in bringing about the grave consequences of the war that the photographs represent. The terror, tremor, and trauma that these photographs intend to convey largely depend on our reception capacity of the layers of meaning they embody. The same point is underlined by Sturken and Cartwright (2001). They believe, "the capacity of images to affect us as viewers is dependent on the larger cultural meanings they evoke and the social, political and cultural contexts in which they are viewed" (Sturken and Cartwright, 2010, p. 21). In short, the ideological bearing of the viewers contributes vigorously to making comprehensive meaning of the images.

CONCLUSION

Yeva's memoir, *You Don't Know What War Is: The Diary of a Young Girl from Ukraine* (2022) presents a pictorial description of Russian-Ukrainian war and the devastations it caused. The memory of such war has been vividly featured. Her live experiences that have shattered her life and family have also been presented authentically, not only through texts but also through images and photographs. The book has employed multimodal features, i.e., text and images to represent the traumatic memory and subjectivity of Yeva. The use of trauma features and the perceptual, structural, and ideological analytical tools proposed by Serafini (2010) has helped decoding the multimodal subjectivity embedded in the text, and thus adding value to scholarship on trauma and war narratives.

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